CHILDREN'S SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 20 March 2013
(6:00 - 7:47 pm)

Present: Councillor G Letchford (Chair), Councillor P Burgon, Councillor L Butt, Councillor R Douglas, Councillor A S Jamu, Councillor E Kangethe, Councillor B Poulton and Councillor A Salam; Paul Cox

Apologies: Councillor T Perry, Mrs Ghadeer Al-Salem Youssef and Mr Ishmael Ncube

44. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

45. Minutes - To confirm as correct the minutes of the meeting held on 6 February 2013

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 Feb were confirmed as correct.

46. The Local Picture: Verbal Update on Evidence Gathering in Schools

Anne Pepper, Principle Adviser, Secondary (PAS), provided a verbal update on the work being done to establish what role school councils play in promoting student voice in the Borough, as part of the Committee's in-depth review.

This involved working closely with different schools and asking them a variety of questions on how their school councils function. Officers working on this had about a five week window to work with schools, collate and analyse the data and, draw conclusions from it.

50 schools indicated that they would participate and visits were arranged with each school to draw out the evidence. Of the 50 visits, 42 had been undertaken to date and the remaining 8 visits would be rearranged after Easter, and so may not able to be included in the final report.

A summary report would be drafted to be completed, two weeks after the Easter holidays. Each visit has been evaluated using the Ofsted criteria of ‘outstanding’, ‘good’, ‘satisfactory/requires improvement’ or ‘inadequate’. So far, none of the schools had been rated ‘outstanding’ in terms of their school councils’ functions; however, most had been rated ‘good’, some satisfactory/requiring improvement. None of those visited to date, have been rated as inadequate.

The evidence so far suggests that schools councils in primary schools are more resourceful and imaginative, and have moved on from basic topics such as toilets and food to intermediate areas such as the playground and school uniforms. A few were tackling more complex matters such as improving learning or safety and conduct. One school, for example, put up posters in response to behaviour of some parents in the playground which the children were not happy with.
Schools were generally very positive about taking part in this work and contributed to recommendations which may be proposed in the report presenting the evidence from this exercise. One thing that was already clear was that staff felt that further local face to face training in supporting school councils was needed. They had pointed to downloadable courses on the Schools Councils UK website.

It was evident that school councils were a real strength to their schools; however, there were areas where further development would really help. Staff were observed to provide substantial advice to the children and there were questions around how much assistance they should provide in the selection process which admitted children to the school council. Furthermore, school council activities had apparent links to principles such as leadership and citizenship; however, these needed to be more firmly embedded. Some schools worked on a 'you said; we did' model which was particularly good.

The Corporate Director, Children's Services (CDCS) stated the 'you said we did' model was very important as lack of reporting on what the school council was doing about matters raised gave the impression that it served only a 'tokenistic' purpose. Something Paul Cox, (who acted as the Youth Representative on this Committee) had raised during this review was that when the recommendations of school councils could not be implemented, it was crucial that the school explains why to avoid creating an atmosphere of futility.

In response to questions, the PAS stated that a particularly good model at one school was that pupils on the school council were appointed for two years so that for example, a pupil in Year 1 elected to the school council would remain a school councillor in Year 2, having shadowed their Year 2 peer in Year 1.

The PAS stated that school councils were very good at promoting their work and reporting to the school what they had done about a given issue. However, they needed to work on the time between when the matter had been raised with them and the time they reported back to the rest of the school.

Members asked what methods schools councils used to report back on the issues they had been looking at. The PAS stated this varied from school to school but included reporting at school assembly, school council representatives reporting back to their class or form and newsletters, for example.

Members enquired about the role of teachers in supporting school council representatives. The PAS stated that teachers supported with matters such as structuring the constitution, defining the remit of the school council and budget setting.

Members expressed keen interest in the finer details of the work being done with schools and its findings. Officers explained that this agenda item was to provide a verbal summary of the work currently being done. There was a lot of evidence to get through to bring together the findings from this review and once this is done, officers would share the information with members who would then be able to use the evidence for its Scrutiny Report on Student Voice. Officers would also give consideration to whether the findings could be shared with stakeholders in a different way, including via social media.
Sem Simkins, Trainer and Consultant from School Councils UK, introduced himself to the Committee and outlined his background.

He recommended the two following very useful resources in the field of school councils:

- *School Councils – School Improvement* (Prof. Lynn Davies and Hiromi Yamashita, University of Birmingham, 2007)

Mr Simkins shared a handout with those present, which was used to discuss his experiences of the effectiveness of school councils and facilitate a discussion with member. The discussion is outlined below.

**Pupil Voice (introduction)**

There were very clear reasons as to why schools should have school councils:

- Children’s rights
- Active citizenship
- School improvement
- Personalisation

Model school councils are ones:

- That have ownership and responsibility
- That have a voice and a raised profile
- That have links to Personal, sexual, health education (PSHE) matters
- That operate on the principles of democracy and promote good citizenship
- That work in partnership
- That communicate well
- Where staff enlighten the perception of themselves with children

**1. The "Perfect" School Council**

The structure of the school council should form part of the school’s teaching strategy. The whole basis of the school council is to serve and impact positively on all the pupils of the school.

Mr Simkins provided an example of work he did with a school in Hendon where he had used the analogy of a car to describe to the children how school councils work. The children understood that like petrol was needed to get the car moving, good school council reps were needed to make their school councils effective.

All pupils need time and space to meet and receive feedback from the representatives who attend school council meetings. It’s often necessary for staff to let go and allow pupils to take ownership. Tutors need support and training to empower pupils. Schools councils should be a decision making body, responsible to relay what students have to say to staff.
There was a tendency in some primary schools to operate a 'decision-action' model whereby the pupils would identify the action that needed to be taken but the action itself would be taken by the teacher. Where appropriate, pupils should also be involved in taking action.

It was important that school councils were not seen as the sole responsibility of the link-teacher and there was input from all staff. The budget available to support the school council should be made clear.

Mr Simkins described an exercise he undertook with schools whereby he asked pupils to choose whether red, blue or green was their favourite colour and then move to the relevant marked space to indicate their preference. He observed that very few pupils ever said that they could not choose (because their favourite colour was not given as an option) and instead went along with what their peers did. He highlighted this to them and used it to explain to pupils that they should speak out if a viable option had not been put forward in their school council meetings. Another exercise involved asking pupils to name their favourite animal and explain their choice. This demonstrated that people could arrive at the same decision but for different reasons, and it was therefore important to explore the reasons behind people's support for a decision.

School council elections should be democratic and the best model was the secret ballot. In some schools the elections take place during break time with over 68% turnout, which was very positive and telling. Election information should spell out what role a school council representative will play and feedback following the election should be given. This was an area for weakness for some schools and one where tutors could provide more support by learning from practice.

It was important that school councils avoided a 'no-moans' culture and instead promoted a proactive one where pupils are motivated to do something about issues they are not happy with. Consistency in how staff across the school view the school council was particularly crucial for secondary schools and could be improved via training.

School councils should be holistic in who they involve and should include more than just pupils and teachers. There are good examples of schools liaising with their caretakers and kitchen supervisors to resolve matters effectively.

School council should celebrate big and small successes such as pupils taking part in staff appointments.

2. Models for School Councils

Every school was unique and it was important to create a system that worked for it.

There were two models of school council and the appropriateness of each depends on the size of the school. Model A requires pupils to be elected to the relevant 'year council' (one to represent each year group). Representatives of the year council are then are then elected to the whole school council, which represents the whole school. Model B simply requires representatives from each year to sit on the whole school council and there is no 'year council' tier.
An advantage of Model A (and thereby a disadvantage of Model B) was that issues relevant to year seven may not be relevant to Year 11 pupils and therefore the year council provided a forum to discuss issues specific to that year, leaving the wider school council to deal with issues affecting everyone. A further disadvantage of Model B was that not all forms or classes would have direct representatives in the school council.

In response to questions, Paul Cox stated that at his School, there were 12 'student voice' representatives; two per year group. The representatives did well in communicating with their year and form groups. He and his peer were the two representatives for the Sixth Form and he was also the Chair of the School Council.

The CDCS stated that one of the questions was whether to go for continuity of membership on the school council to promote learning and development, over regular change in membership to allow a wider group of people the opportunity to be on the school council. Mr Simkins felt that on balance, continuity to an extent was more important to develop a key set of skills.

Mr Simkins enquired whether representatives who were members of the Youth Parliament also sat on their school councils. Paul Cox stated that every school in this Borough was represented in the Youth Parliament; however, the young people acting as their school’s representatives were not necessarily on their school council.

Mr Simkins stated that the structure in Wales involved all schools having a school council, that fed into an 'area youth council', which reflected the Welsh Assembly model; however, this model was a particularly large scale one which may not be suitable for all.

3. The Profile of School Councils and Communication

The school council should have a high profile and to do this it needs to plan how it would communicate with year groups and staff. Some schools ensured a member of its Senior Management Team attended school council meetings, which sent out a resounding message.

The school council’s profile may also be raised through the school handbook or prospectus to ensure all students including new ones, know the structure and their points of contact. The Notice Board was also a good way to promote the school council’s work.

In this Borough, the Sydney Russell School Council used email to identify issues of concern. Some staff may feel wary about using emails due to the fear of pupils using email to send unsolicited messages; however in 2005, of the 1000 emails the School Council received, only 10 were considered inappropriate. It was about trusting pupils to use the facilities and opportunities correctly.

It was important to provide the school council with all relevant information so that it could make good decisions. The minutes and other forms of feedback should be consistent.
4. Using Pupil Voice to support school improvement and governance

Mr Simkins stated that from the earlier agenda item and the fact that he had been asked to come today to speak about school councils, it was evident that the Council was very serious about this issue- it was the first time he had been invited to a council meeting.

It was essential to have some mechanism to link the school council with the school's governing body. In one school the chair of the governing body joined a students' training session, which sent out an important message. The CDCS stated that this would be effective provided the chair listened, knew where to step back and congratulate. She also stated that one of the positive outcomes of the Student Voice review could be to enable school governors to ask their Senior Management Teams to ask to see what was being implemented to strengthen their schools councils.

Mr Simkins commented that he had observed that schools could often be seen as, and work as, isolated units. The CDCS stated that fortunately, this was not the case in this Borough as schools had signed up for strong partnership working with the Local Authority, which facilitated its close-working with the Barking and Dagenham (BAD) youth forum, made up pupils from different schools across the Borough.

Members commented that the role of parents also needed to be focussed on as without their support and encouragement it would be difficult for young people to have the enthusiasm and confidence required to be actively involved in their school councils. Mr Simkins stated that it was therefore important for schools to articulate to parents what role the school council plays and provide them with relevant information.

Members felt that more information about school councils should be shared across the Borough, as a lot of people were ignorant of them. Mr Simkins stated some ways to do this were parents' evenings, displaying information about the school council on notice boards at schools and working with local councillors.

Councillor Kangethe stated that as a teacher, she was concerned that in order to empower school councils, teachers needed to put in time, and needed support. Mr Simkins stated that staff time was an issue for many schools; however, schools which ensured that their school council was a part of their listening and speaking strategy, and acknowledged that the skills pupils picked up in being involved were general ones that could be applied to all subjects, had more chance of being successful.

Members felt that schools need to make it clear that young people would be listened to. It is very hard to engage even adults into being active in their communities; a lot of people had the view that it was boring and, children may also feel that way about their school. It was therefore important to shape school councils to become interesting places which make real differences.

Mr Simkins stated that some primary school children have very active roles on their school council in their final year but after their transition to secondary school, find that they have very little opportunity to have an input as their school was not aware of their previous role. The CDCS stated that again, fortunately, in this
Borough pupils did not appear to become disinterested at the secondary stage and this was evident in the activities of the BAD Youth Forum. Paul Cox stated that this was correct, young people themselves did not switch off; however, some senior staff held very conservative views about the roles of pupils in their schools, and the key for him was how to change their mindset.

Mr Simkins expressed regret that the new national curriculum could mean that a number of skills such as critical thinking, relating to school councils, would not get as much focus.

5. Closing comments

A novel way to give the school council a voice would be to schedule a few minutes for a school council representative to address staff at their staff meetings.

Councillor Kangethe stated that another possible way to give the school council more voice would be to dedicate at least one school assembly every year to receiving a talk or presentation from the school council on a matter that was important to pupils.

The CDCS stated that the young people in the Borough had been failed in the sense that although they had good qualifications, some of their skills such as speaking and presenting, had not been developed to their full potential, which made them less competitive at job interviews, for example. This report on Student Voice was ultimately about improving opportunities for young people to have a voice within their school, which would have continuous benefits for them after leaving school.

48. Date of Next Meeting

Noted.